

"Nothing If Not Eventful"

Recollections of a Life's Journey in CIA

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*T*o my nuclear family—my late wife and companion of 52 years Gisela, our daughter, Christine, and her two children, who have always stood with me through trying times—and my “company” family, which shaped this collection of memories. And in loving remembrance of my twin sister, Betty, who passed away just before this book was published.



Preface

*I*t was not long after my retirement from the agency, but well into my second career, as an agency historian, that I began to hear suggestions—in a few cases, urging—that I do a memoir of my career as an operations officer. No two careers in operations are identical, of course, but that doesn't mean that all of them merit being recorded for posterity. Although mine was certainly more varied than the average, I wasn't persuaded that it offered the variety, in perspective as well as substance, that a potential reader deserves. And then there was the problem of balancing an account intended for a varied readership of colleagues, family, and friends. Family and friends may have a limited appetite for ruminations about agency culture, while colleagues may find in them the main justification for the entire enterprise.

It is only now, after thirty-five years in the Directorate of Operations and a full thirty more doing history, that I presume to offer a summary of what I saw and what I think I learned. My conclusions are, of course, influenced by my idiosyncrasies as an observer. I want to make these as clear to the reader as I can, and that is part of the reason for attention to phases of my life unrelated to service with the agency. And just by itself, longevity offers opportunities for understanding, and I hope to have taken some advantage of them.



Acknowledgments

Of the five people most instrumental in helping me shape this book, two are veterans of the intelligence profession, one also an accomplished historian and the other a senior operations officer and manager. The others are Mike Cheever and Jamie Baker, both richly experienced legal professionals, who provided encouraging comments on early drafts, and Ken McDonald, who as CIA chief historian taught me how to write history. Their combined counsel has given this account such coherence as the reader may find in it.

Taking the place of her mother, who is sadly no longer with us, my daughter, Christine, generously shared her recollections.

The single most indispensable contributor to the project has been Andres Vaart, like all the others a valued friend but also, in his case, an expert editor and production manager. Without Andy's endlessly patient commitment to it, the effort would never have come to fruition. He would add, of course, that he did not work alone, having had help from his spouse, herself an experienced editor and historian. and from the graphic design work of members of the Center for the Study of Intelligence.

It must also be acknowledged that this work did undergo the review of CIA's Prepublication Classification Review Board, which reviewed the content solely to ensure that it contains no classified information. This the members of the board did expeditiously and reasonably as they could.



Foreword

I first met Tom Ahern in 1977 at the National War College in Washington, DC, where he was a student, more than 20 years into his career, after a tour of duty in West Africa. As a member of a graduate seminar I taught on 20th century US diplomatic history, Tom impressed me by his comments in class and by his term paper on the United States and Vichy France, 1940–1942. As a clear exposition of a complicated historical situation, his paper was an early sign of his later skill as a CIA historian.

Not long after Tom graduated from the War College, CIA sent him to Iran as chief of station in Tehran. I, like so many others, was distressed in November 1979 when Iranian student radicals stormed the US Embassy and took hostage Tom and some 60 other members of the embassy staff. Tom and his fellow staff members would be confined for 14 months. I was able to meet Tom again that same year not long after I had joined CIA as its chief historian.

We kept in touch and when Tom was approaching retirement I invited him to join the CIA History Staff as a contract historian to write about CIA's long and unhappy engagement in Southeast Asia. Over the next 32 years Tom's prodigious work included six volumes on this subject: four on Vietnam, one on Laos, and one on Cambodia. In 2009, the University of Kentucky Press published the first volume, *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency*. This work appeared after CIA had declassified (with varying degrees of deletions) all six of his volumes before a major conference on the subject in Texas that year. Tom's most recent work on the region appeared in 2022, when CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence published, *"An Excellent Idea!" Leading Surrogate Warfare in Southeast Asia, 1951-1970: A Personal Account*, by James W. "Bill" Lair, as told to Thomas L. Ahern, Jr. Tom has also turned to other difficult issues in diplomatic and intelligence history, including the role of US intelligence in Iran in the years leading up to Khomeini's revolution and in Iraq after US forces invaded in 2003.

Now, Tom has written a first-rate memoir of his own 34 years' service as an officer in CIA's Directorate of Operations. His work illuminates a notable life in successive tours abroad in Japan, Laos, South Vietnam, Congo/Kinshasa, the Philippines, Cambodia, Iran, West Africa, and Europe. Tom's accounts all reflect on several special qualities— tradecraft, values, leadership and culture—and their evolution. It is these qualities that he believes have shaped CIA into its present form, nearly 70 years after an Agency recruiter came to Notre Dame University and persuaded him to enter a career in the Clandestine Service.

—J. Kenneth McDonald
November 2023



Contents

Initialisms and Acronyms	xi
Introduction	1
Chapter One: From Childhood to CIA Comes Calling	5
Chapter Two: Introduction to the Clandestine Service	21
Chapter Three: Apprenticeship in Post-Occupation Japan, 1957–59	33
Chapter Four: Into Laos and the Paramilitary World, 1960–62.....	41
Chapter Five: “Saving” South Vietnam, 1963–65.....	63
Chapter Six: A New Partnership—and Solo Tour in Africa, 1965	79
Chapter Seven: Respite in the Philippines, 1966–69.....	87
Chapter Eight: Back to Southeast Asia, 1970–72	97
Chapter Nine: JOTP, West Africa, National War College, 1973–79	111
Chapter Ten: Iran, A Protracted Stay, 1979–81	129
Chapter Eleven: More Forays into Personnel Management, 1981–84	157
Chapter Twelve: Europe 1985–88	163
Chapter Thirteen: A Look into the Rearview Mirror	169
Bibliography of Thomas L. Ahern, Jr. Unclassified Works.....	177



Initialisms and Acronyms

AF Division	Africa Division/Directorate of Operations
AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
APA	Advance Political Action (South Vietnam)
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South)
CINCPAC	Commander-in-Chief US Forces in the Pacific,
COS/DCOS	Chief of the CIA station/deputy chief
CTD/CT	Career Training Division/Career Trainee (CIA)
DCI	Director of Central Intelligence
DDP	Directorate of Plans
DO/DDO/ADDO	Directorate of Operations (renamed from DDP in 1973)/Deputy Director for Operations/Assistant DDO
EA Division	East Asia Division, Directorate of Operations (formerly FE Division)
FANK	Forces Armées Nationales Khmeres (Armed Forces of Cambodia)
FAR	Forces Armees du Royaume (Laotien)
FE Division	Far East Division, Directorate of Plans
GS	General Schedule-US Federal pay scale
GVN	Government of Vietnam (South)
JOTP (CIA)	Junior Officer Training Program
JUSMAG	Joint US Military Advisory Group (Philippines)
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MPLA	People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola
NCO	Non-commissioned officer
NE Division	Near East Division/Directorate of Operations
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
NKP	Nakhon Phanom, Thailand
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
NWC	National War College
OCS	Officer Candidate School
OP	Office of Personnel (CIA)
OSS (WW II)	Office of Strategic Services
PARU	Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (Thailand)
PAF	Philippine Air Force
PAT	People's Action Team(s) (South Vietnam)

R&R	Rest and recreation
RLG	Royal Lao Government
RMD	Related Mission Directive
ROTC (Air Force)	Reserve Officer Training Corps
SIS	Senior Intelligence Service (Executive level)
SMSA	St. Mary's Springs Academy
SOD	Special Operations Division, DDP
STOL	Short-takeoff-and-landing (aircraft)
TO&E	Table of organization and equipment
USAID	US Agency for International Development
USOM	US Official Mission of USAID
VC	Viet Cong Communist National Liberation Front guerilla forces in South Vietnam
VIS	Vietnam Information Service



"Nothing If Not Eventful"



Introduction

In early 1954, nearing graduation from the University of Notre Dame, I expected to enter my father's mechanical contracting business in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, but I was restless enough to be alert to interesting options. It did not, of course, occur to me to put the Central Intelligence Agency on a list of potential employers, and, even if I had, I couldn't have followed through as it had no public recruiting mechanism at the time. I certainly couldn't have imagined that 25 years later I would begin what I can safely call the most trying episode of my working life when, after President Jimmy Carter granted asylum to the exiled Shah of Iran, student radicals seized the US Embassy, taking 63 Americans hostage. 52 of them would be held captive for 444 days. I would spend 14 months in solitary confinement.

Even if I had by chance been aware of CIA as a possible employer, there would have been no way to foresee that, within seven years, I would be charged with the creation and command of a thousand-man paramilitary unit in the tiny kingdom of Laos, part of the former French Indochina. Or that my career would eventually take me to Japan, South Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, West Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Europe, as well as Iran. Or that I would enjoy a second career, also more than 30 years long, writing histories of CIA operations. My research during this period provided many of the insights I bring to this account of my work in the field.

I joined an organization whose understanding of the world and of itself was mostly a product of its role in World War II. This was inevitable, as it had no earlier history and no older traditions to inform its response to present challenges. Into the 1960s and beyond, that foreshortened perception of history fostered an almost overweening confidence that the United States deserved its self-assigned role as leader of the free world and that the Agency had a part of singular importance to play, a course that it would chart for itself. Over time, the Agency, and I along with it, learned that this world view had its blind spots and that our self-confidence was sometimes dangerously misplaced. This memoir is in part an account of the gradual

Introduction

process by which we came to recognize and try to deal with at least some of these misperceptions.

My own experience with that process began with the discovery, as I worked with a succession of agents and covert action partners, that the American way is not the only—and not even necessarily the best or most admired—way of doing something. This was especially true of what we now call the Third World or the developing world (both of which labels convey a certain air of condescension). I recall the chronic frustration of those of us assigned to help build representative government in countries such as Laos and South Vietnam in the 1960s. We assumed—without ever articulating it—that American power proved the superiority of our country's institutions and values, an illusion that survived, with at least sporadic resurgence, almost to the end of the 20th century. We learned only gradually that our clients' resistance to these efforts—often in the form of impenetrable inertia—demonstrated that, at the very least, we had not communicated the urgent importance of our cause.

Writing history about things, some of which I knew about from personal experience, taught me that a sincere conviction about the merits of a course of action may hide its dangers. It may even hide the nature of the challenge being addressed. That lesson may be learned, if at all, only after numerous failures. It eluded me through my six years of service in Indochina, and I absorbed it only in the course of historical work on the Vietnam War. Our pacification programs there recognized the need for civilian participation, but, along with my colleagues, I never inquired into the familial and local ties between the Viet Cong and much of the peasantry and the role of that connection in fueling the insurgency. I also absorbed the prevailing psychological denial of the implications of corrupt and clumsy military government for our nation-building project.

Life in a variety of foreign environments teaches as many lessons at the personal level as at the professional. Most of them involve recognizing and, often, adapting to cultural differences. Two such contrasts are the strength of family relationships and the importance of relationships of mutual trust to the success of professional associations. These vary among cultures, of course, but I generally found that respect for these values, especially the second, added substantially to the productivity of contacts with both agents and contacts in liaison services. These lessons were amplified by my marriage to a bride from Germany and, with that, the acquisition of a German family. I shared Gisela's German culture. My mother's forebears had emigrated to the United States from the Rhineland in the late 19th century. Despite—or perhaps to a degree because of—the similarities, however, my new family added insights to those gained at work. The German indifference to home ownership, for

example, and a contrasting devotion to high-quality foodstuffs are only two of the differences I discovered.

More generally, my life and work abroad taught me about the kind of comportment that facilitates working relationships with people of entirely different life experiences and worldviews—that is, all of the people we call foreigners. One learns that one’s job is not to export American values or institutions unless they are wanted, and, in my experience, the appetite for such things is limited. Identifying similar or at least compatible interests usually turns out to be a more rewarding approach to winning the cooperation of potential agents than proclaiming their duty to help us save their country—or the world—from what we perceive as an existential threat.

This account would distort the atmosphere of my work as an operations officer if it did not acknowledge that it was, for the most part, genuinely satisfying. A fellow CIA annuitant who travels from New England for occasional contract work in the Washington, DC, area told me on one such trip that he did it mainly for the company of the most engaging assortment of people he has ever known. I think that’s the main source of my own continuing attachment to the service, even more than the occasional thrills and the intermittent sense of accomplishment it has granted me.





Chapter One

From Childhood to CIA Comes Calling

My upbringing in a Catholic household in the 1930s and 1940s had been entirely conventional. I had a devoted, loving mother and an intermittently affectionate, fiercely impatient, and always generous father.



Chapter One



Left: As a Sea Scout in high school
ca. 1948.

Below: Christmas gathering at home
in Fond du Lac in the early 1950s.



Nothing in my early life would have suggested a future anywhere outside of Fond du Lac, my Wisconsin hometown, let alone a uniquely eventful career in foreign intelligence and covert action. Every assignment posed its own challenges, and, although not every posting abroad involved threat to life or limb, service in Laos and Vietnam during the Vietnam War meant that this was not rare either. Inevitably, I suppose, the Tehran episode remains the one most vividly embedded in my memory. Being beaten with a rubber hose early in my captivity and subsequently threatened with public execution and other psychological torments throughout my captivity, together with a continuous and oppressive sense of utter helplessness, combined to instill in me an indelible set of recollections.

Perhaps my single most vivid memory is of the day I was taken out of my cell blindfolded and—I was always blindfolded, even to go to the toilet—taken by car to a freezing cold building somewhere in or near Tehran (it turned out to have been the Foreign Ministry’s shuttered guest house). There I was marched into a silent room and, still blindfolded, placed in the comfort of a padded chair. My spirits rose, but not because of the comfort.

Our captors had told us that, if we were ever to be released, this would happen only after President Carter was no longer in office. They had gleefully informed me of his defeat in November 1980, but, two months after that, we were still in our cells. The luxurious chair seemed like a favorable sign, but I knew that self-deception at such a critical moment would only intensify the despair that would surely follow if it turned out I had been kidding myself.

So, I started feeling around the chair for further signs of where I’d been brought. At first, nothing. Then, behind the chair, my hand encountered what was unmistakably an upholstered wall. The unseen opulence of the room settled the matter: “Tom, you’re going home.” A couple of days later, after the inauguration of Ronald Reagan, we were on our way in an Algerian Airlines plane whose presumably Muslim crew treated us to generous servings of spirits on the flight to Algiers.

A Conventional Upbringing

My upbringing in a Catholic household in the 1930s and 1940s had been entirely conventional. I had a devoted, loving mother and an intermittently affectionate, fiercely impatient, and always generous father. Corporal punishment routinely

accompanied affection in those years, and, egged on by Betty (Elizabeth), my mischievous twin sister, I got to know it well. A brother, Michael, soon followed us, then two afterthoughts, a girl, Catherine, 12 years younger than Betty and I, and a boy, Joseph, 14 years our junior. My father's generosity extended to putting each of us through the colleges of our choice. I picked the University of Notre Dame for no better reason, as I recall, than the appeal of the 1940 movie about its famous football coach, Knute Rockne. I was in my teens before I traveled as far as Chicago even though it was only 150 miles from Fond du Lac (pop. 27,600), and I knew more distant destinations only as movie settings, if at all, until I reached college age.

Catholic schools, both primary and secondary, were then fully staffed by clergy. Nuns taught the secular curriculum, and priests presided over religion. On graduation from college, I had had 16 years of this sectarian regimen, which featured competent instruction, strict but not harsh grade-school discipline, and, in high school, displays of the traditional American Catholic clergy's fear of—indeed, revulsion at the idea of—sex. A story from my high school years may be apocryphal, but, perhaps especially, it illustrates the atmosphere: One Saturday afternoon, a girl classmate of mine entered the confessional at our parish church, St. Mary's, but she hardly had time to kneel down before everyone in the church heard an outraged scream from her confessor: "Is French kissing a SIN?" That the question was entirely rhetorical only added to the drama.

Not even puppy love was endorsed in an institution run by lifelong celibates. Only one of the nuns took a more pragmatic approach to the subject. In her biology class, the first time she mentioned sex—in the context of plant reproduction, I think—she drew a wave of giggles. She gave us a look that I couldn't quite read—pitying, maybe, or just dismissive—and tartly advised us to get used to the idea that sex is simply how nature works.

It seems only fair to note that, throughout my years in Catholic schools, I never experienced or even heard the faintest hint of any clerical sexual abuse of students. Social inhibitions and the power of the clergy to conceal its abuses have eroded greatly since the unrest of the late 1960s and the 1970s, and it would be naïve to assume that clerical behavior had until then been flawless. Nevertheless, the nuns and priests who taught us displayed nothing but a selfless commitment to our education—always, of course, within the doctrinal framework imposed by their religious commitment.

I was still in grade school when I got my introduction to the possible appeal of a life in the outside world. St. Mary's parish school received occasional visits from priests recruiting for their religious, usually missionary, orders. One of these men, who had served in Japan, played up the exotic missionary environment. He taught my class of seventh or eighth graders the first five Japanese cardinal numbers: *ichi*

(he pronounced it “itchy,” to our great amusement), ni (taps his knee), san (points outside toward the sun), shi (points at one of the girls), and go (moves as if to leave). I didn’t buy this soft-sell approach, but I do think it helped plant the interest in Asia that I developed in the years that followed.

My high school, St. Mary’s Springs Academy (SMSA), stood outside town on the Niagara Ledge, which passes under the Great Lakes before rising into Door County peninsula on its way south. Like my parish grade school, it was run by the Sisters of St. Agnes and, until just a few years earlier, had been exclusively a girls’ boarding school. In 1946, there were only 20 boys in my class of 100, a circumstance that allowed me, tall for my age but a mediocre athlete, to make the basketball team. The Academy ran on a stringent budget, which meant the coaching, by a former University of Wisconsin football player of no distinction, was no better than my playing. This made improvement difficult, but membership on the team helped facilitate one high school imperative, namely, group acceptance. This was not a problem on the feminine side; girls are not allergic to other students’ good grades, which I think was responsible for my being elected class president twice during my four years at SMSA (class presidents were always male, by custom if not by rule).

Good grades, however, were not a ticket to popularity among my male peers, and, as mine had come to be known as the best in my cohort, I had to work at being accepted. That I was only partly successful reflected my lifelong aversion to conventional social values when these seem arbitrary or just plain silly. Doing what the gang wanted to do often fell into one or another of these categories. I remember, for instance, my exasperation with the other members of my Boy Scout first-aid team when they seemed more interested in horsing around than in practicing the bandaging and resuscitation techniques that we were supposed to be learning in order to compete with other Scout troops in mock emergencies. They were indeed being childish, but, on the other hand, there was more than a touch of rigidity in my own approach to the issue. This propensity continued long enough to get in the way of the cordiality that, however superficial at times, is so important to productive professional relationships.

An interest in music, especially classical music, was also not to my social advantage, particularly in grade school. Starting at the age of eight or so and encouraged though not pushed by my musically inclined mother, I began my lifelong tortured relationship with the piano. Those of my classmates who were aware of my weekly music lessons might have been less dismissive of such artsy activity if they’d known of my struggle to make music and its mixed results. On the other hand, it might only have reinforced their disdain. Either way, I have persisted to this day. My effort was not entirely devoid of positive effect even in my professional life, which I will treat in later chapters.

On to South Bend

Applications to college did not, in the 1950s at least, try to measure maturity, and Notre Dame promptly accepted me. My parents drove me there the first time, but after that I went by rail, changing trains in Chicago. South Bend, Indiana, was bigger than Fond du Lac but not much more cosmopolitan, and the student body was as small-town as I was, although no one had to conceal good grades. Even so, Notre Dame might have turned out to be an uninspired choice had it not been for its coincidental launching of a new academic program.

My application specified that I was seeking admission to the engineering and law programs. During my last semester in high school, however, the university had sent a brochure touting a new liberal arts program—lots of classics but no major and no electives—modeled on the Great Books concept promoted by the University of Chicago’s Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler in the 1940s. The brochure for this “General Program of Liberal Education,” or GP, made me aware that my interest in engineering—and in business, for that matter—was a more contingent thing than I’d realized. With the approval of my parents, who were paying for the enterprise, I decided to give it a try.

Although the program did not point to a clear career choice, it suited my interests, and I stayed with it to graduation. Its single most satisfying feature was an emphasis on analytic thinking. Teachers did not interpret Plato and Aristotle for us but demanded that we read and then try to parse them in seminar sessions. We got the professor’s help only after working ourselves into logical corners trying to explain the arguments in Plato’s *Republic* or Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. The merit of this discipline, as painful as it sometimes was, soon became evident in dormitory bull sessions when English and philosophy majors found themselves hard pressed to match even the modest capacity for orderly thought that we were beginning to develop.

Relationships with my classmates were cordial enough, although none developed into lifelong friendships. The friendship that did survive was the most unlikely ever to have started. Father Thomas Brennan, audibly a product of the Bronx, had been working for the New York Central Railroad when he found his religious vocation. In his mid-forties when we met, he was teaching philosophy, with a Catholic school’s customary emphasis on Aristotle and his avatar, St. Thomas Aquinas. The last-minute creation of the GP had put the program at the end of the line for campus real estate, and one of our classrooms was a decrepit wooden attic under the Golden Dome. Nearly everyone smoked in those days, and, looking back, I wonder how we failed to burn the building down.

Fr. Brennan smoked Camel cigarettes, lots of them, and they wound up being his undoing. I was a smoker too, but what established a bond of friendship was our

Notre Dame Memories

Graduation Day in South Bend, 1954.
Twin sister Betty and little sister and
brother, Catherine and Joseph.



YEARS AHEAD OF THEM ALL

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In the day, like so many others, I was a smoker, encouraged by peers and full page advertisements of cigarettes in Notre Dame's student weekly, *The Scholastic*, which tended to focus on much other than the scholastic life of the university. My most valued mentor, Father Thomas J. Brennan, would fall victim to Camels.

Father Brennan led a quixotic effort to turn Notre Dame into a paradigm of liberal education. On a visit to him after he had retired, he gave me the gift a fellow cleric had carved for him out of a tree fungus.



mutual love of music, his for Beethoven and mine for the Romantics. I would lend him LP records from my tiny collection—I liked Beethoven, too—and we would correspond occasionally during summer vacation.

With his background in business, Fr. Brennan unsurprisingly displayed a practical mind in his teaching. While discussing Aristotle's *Ethics* as well as other subjects, he would extol the virtue of prudence, a cultivated practice of determining and then doing the right things in given sets of circumstances. Concern for the consequences of one's actions is not a preoccupation of barely post-adolescent males, and we did not wildly applaud his efforts. His no-nonsense commentary on ancient texts was unique in the GP faculty, however, and served to establish him—at least in my view—as the best among his peers.

Fr. Brennan (although his friend, I never addressed him by his first name) disagreed profoundly with the ambitious expansion program of Theodore Hesburgh, the newly appointed university president and his seminary classmate. Brennan was deeply committed to the concept of the liberal education as adapted from Chicago and St. John's College in Maryland. He thought Hesburgh's emphasis on expanding Notre Dame to compete with major secular schools was abdicating an opportunity to make it the premier Catholic exponent of classical education. When he saw that he was fighting a losing battle, he left Notre Dame for parish work in New Orleans. Years later, when Gisela and I visited him there, his pastor told us that Fr. Brennan's Sunday sermons were the most thoughtful and enriching he had ever heard.

Fr. Brennan recognized his tendency to overreach. When I saw my friend for the last time, he had returned to Notre Dame's retirement facility for Holy Cross priests. During our visit, shortly before he died of lung cancer, he gave me a small etching on a tree fungus, done by a fellow priest, of a mounted Don Quixote, lance under arm, charging the proverbial windmill. The artist obviously knew that the original recipient of the piece could take a joke; had he been mistaken, the little objet d'art would not now stand on the desk where I write. All these years later, I still sympathize with Fr. Brennan's goals, which included education in citizenship, not by indoctrination but by serious study of history's great thinkers on the subject. Indeed, watching the decay of our democracy that now threatens the very idea of citizenship as both a shared gift and a shared challenge, my admiration for his commitment is only reinforced. The armistice in Korea had ended the war there in 1953, and the military draft, which was still in effect, was almost the only intrusion of the outside world into our academic cloister. I lost an intended roommate to the draft when his grades slipped enough to land him in the Army the summer before our senior year.

One brief distraction was the Joseph McCarthy House Un-American Activities Committee hearings (1950–54), which came to a head during my last semester and which we watched on what passed for television in the campus coffee shop (the

dormitories had no TV, good or bad). I remember feeling some reluctance, as a good Wisconsin boy from a solidly Republican family, to accept how richly McCarthy deserved Army lawyer Joseph Welch's reproachful question, "Sir, have you left no sense of decency?"

An Aura of Secrecy

Having planted the seed of doubt about my career choice, Notre Dame rescued me from the resulting uncertainty when it introduced me to CIA. Applying to the Agency was not an option, but it could, if it wished, come to you. Dr. Otto Bird, the dean of my program, called me to his office one day in my senior year to say that he was expecting visitors from Washington who wanted faculty suggestions for candidates to interview for unspecified classified employment. The aura of secrecy made up for the absence of any job description, and I signed up on the spot. Weeks later, a middle-aged interviewer with a scholarly manner revealed that CIA was my prospective employer. I could tell my family—but no one else. That ban was not lifted until I retired. The recruitment pitch left open just what I might be expected to do; the description of clandestine operations was particularly opaque. My reaction was the same as it had been to Dr. Bird: the special aura and the country's general atmosphere of anticommunist fervor were more than enough to whet my interest further.

Dr. Bird did not explain why, as it appeared, he had recommended only me, out of his program of 50 students, to CIA. Possibly my career indecision was unusually obvious, or perhaps I just looked like a poor prospect for graduate school. I do know that what made me receptive was a gnawing uncertainty about what to do with my life, reinforced by some youthful thrill-seeking.

Beyond a hint of intellectual discipline and good grades, I had precious little—certainly no relevant experience—to offer, and I was pleasantly surprised when CIA offered to hire me for its Junior Officer Training Program (JOTP), which it touted as its instrument for bringing in new generations of management. Such interest as I had in mechanical engineering disappeared, but I consulted with my parents before accepting. My father, so demanding in little things, was entirely understanding about this transformation, and both he and my mother remained supportive as I launched an unforeseen career.

Off to the Army

The recruitment process and subsequent preparations for my move to Washington revealed some odd features of CIA security and administrative practice. First was the JOTP requirement that all new recruits conceal their CIA employment

from everyone except immediate family. This applied even to people like me whose profiles suggested they were destined for work in intelligence analysis, a job for which cover was not required. This imperative did not come with a story to account for my going to Washington. For this, it turned out, I was on my own. The jovial onetime academic who interviewed me laughed at my question and assured me that he had full confidence in my ability to think of something. An even less sensible rule applied when as a requirement of the JOTP process, I joined the Army that fall; I was ordered to tell unwitting contacts that I was headed for Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, even though I already knew that my destination was Ft. Knox. There was no way to explain that anomaly, and I could do nothing but ignore requests for a mailing address from unwitting friends and family members.

There were more such oddities during my introduction to my new employer. After a night in a Washington hotel in late June, I set out for CIA Headquarters, following instructions to tell the cab driver that I was headed for the neighborhood of the Lincoln Memorial. We were almost there when he asked for the street address. I gave it to him, and he said it didn't exist. The name of the building, "Quarters Eye," didn't work, either. I had been told that it was one of a cluster of temporary buildings erected during the war in a compound on Ohio Drive. As a last resort, I tried that description. To my great relief, it sufficed for him to get me to the dilapidated "tempo" that served as CIA's personnel office.

I wondered if someone had used this misinformation as a ploy to test my presence of mind, but it took only a couple of days of processing in the impersonal, bureaucratic atmosphere of Quarters Eye to dispel that notion. Once "on board," as the saying went (and still does), I underwent the standard process of evaluation for aptitudes and overall fitness. I had been administered some pencil-and-paper tests at a federal building in Chicago before CIA made its offer. As it was hiring people for jobs that would sometimes involve life or death decisions, however, it certainly needed more information than afforded by those exercises to see through the youthful innocence of so many of its applicants. For this purpose, it employed the psychological testing regime created by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in World War II. This had proved to be a highly accurate predictor of success in intelligence work, first in WW II and then in the even more complex environment of the Cold War.

Having survived this scrutiny, I was placed in a small group of new recruits—not JOTs, but people awaiting permanent assignments— cataloging an endless supply of photographs of European ground transportation facilities, apparently taken during the war by the OSS. After a few weeks at this mind-numbing task, which I must have unintentionally given the impression of performing with zeal, I was charged with supervising the output of my fellow newbies.

One of the hiring criteria for the JOTP was the prior completion of military service. The aspiring junior officer trainees who lacked this experience had first to take basic military training and then go to officer candidate school before starting CIA training. I had resigned from Air Force ROTC at Notre Dame when, in my last year there, they told me I was not qualified for flight school because I was colorblind. My nearly four years in ROTC counted for nothing, and I got orders to present myself at an Army recruiting station in Washington and enlist as a private in the Army. In October 1954, I left Washington for basic training with the 3rd Armored Division at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Infantry Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia, and a modicum of troop duty would follow, after which I would return to CIA.

Over the summer, I had met a few of my prospective JOTP colleagues, and one of them, a very bright and very personable Princeton grad named Bill Hawley, joined me at Union Station for the train trip to Louisville. To this point, our treatment by the Army had been almost gentle, even including a bunk in a sleeping car. The reception at Ft. Knox was a different matter. Our treatment was by no means brutal or even harsh, but I still remember it: a recent college graduate who still felt like the center of the universe suddenly found himself nothing but a number in a barracks (another WW II temporary) full of other numbers. Some of these belonged to a clutch of roughnecks from Cleveland who had enlisted in the Army as an alternative to jail. The sergeant who occupied the NCO's room in the barracks—a huge, taciturn, black man—kept order in a calm, effortless way that commanded the respect of all his charges; that he was subject to mysterious nightmares only increased his mystique. I once darted between him and the trainee he was talking to, and he quietly but very firmly delivered an unforgettable lesson in common courtesies.

Training at Ft. Knox included learning how to drive an M-47 tank; our only regret in that respect was not reaching gunnery training before being shipped off to Ft. Benning. Hawley and I, by chance next to each other in a row of tanks, once undertook to find out who's was faster; the instructor halted the race over the public address system. Autumn at Ft. Knox was cold and wet that year, and the training regimen included crawling across a field of near-freezing mud while a machine gun fired live ammunition overhead. A few of our fellow warriors did freeze, figuratively speaking, intimidated by the whip-snapping sound of bullets flying by not far above them. Bill and I, having already finished the run, were chosen to crawl back out and talk a couple of them into moving on. We thought the honor may have reflected an instructor's impulse to give the college boys a little graduate education.

Learning how to live with people of radically different life experiences was, of course, not an item on the training schedule, but it was nevertheless a lesson that got a lot of attention from recruits with backgrounds as sheltered as mine. One such experience also served as an early, informal lesson in agent recruitment, The bayonet

to my M-1 rifle disappeared from my locker, which like all the rest had no lock. It seemed to me a good bet that one of the Cleveland contingent had filched it, but it also seemed imprudent to advertise my suspicion. So, I found an opportunity to engage one of the friendlier of the group in conversation. As we chatted, I mentioned the loss. He came back an hour or so later with the number of the locker in which the item was stashed, and that is where I found and retrieved it. My informant sought no reward, resembling in this the great majority of the foreign agents I dealt with in later years; rather, he indulged me for his own reasons, which did not include material gain.

After only about 12 of the scheduled 16 weeks of basic training, Bill and I were startled to be summoned to battalion headquarters. There, a clerk holding two file folders marked SECRET told us that these contained orders to report to Officer Candidate School (OCS) at Ft. Benning. That is where the fun began. It was immediately clear that one of the essential qualifications for an OCS graduate was a demonstrated capacity to absorb a regime of continual verbal abuse. The sergeant who welcomed us to our barracks managed to intimidate me enough to make me finish my answer to a question with a respectful “sir!” The snarling contempt with which he then instructed me on this point of military protocol—an NCO is *never* “sir”—did at least serve to ensure that the blunder was not repeated. And my company’s “Tac” (tactical) officer, a self-proclaimed hog-caller from, I think, Illinois, looked and acted like a parody of Mussolini. His pompous strut would have inspired imitation had it not been for his power to make life miserable for us.

I may have failed to hide my distaste, for he seemed not to like me any better than I liked him. On the firing range one day, we were being taught to use the Browning automatic rifle. Firing in the prone position with the weapon in repeating mode, I got into a such a groove that, after each recoil, the stock returned to my shoulder in exactly the same position as before the shot. Toward the end, I had the sense that I no longer even needed to aim, and I wound up emptying the magazine and scoring only bullseyes. My Tac officer came running down the line to see who had accomplished this feat, but on discovering it was me, he grunted, turned, and strutted off.

It didn’t take long to adjust to the OCS disciplinary regime, but we candidates always harbored a touch of resentment of the ROTC students in the next-door barracks. Although theoretically subject to the same training, they had already been commissioned, which entitled them to lounge around their barracks smoking while we did punitive pushups outside ours.

The physical demands of the training agenda were a good deal more challenging than those we had experienced at Ft. Knox. No one would be able to say that we were going to require of our men what we had never done ourselves. Most of my

fellow “candidates” (the term we had to use when addressing an officer: “Candidate Ahern, *sir*”) were, like me, recent college graduates, but the Army was then encouraging experienced noncoms to apply to OCS, and we had a few of them too. Their experience made the training much less challenging for them than for us new recruits; the only one I remember who had trouble was the company smart-ass. His commission was revoked when he went out on the town just after we graduated and wound up arrested for drunken driving or some such offense.

None of us were surprised at the fate of this trouble-seeker, but Tac officers’ judgments could on occasion seem quite arbitrary. About halfway through the course, one of the most well-regarded men in the company was rejected in one of the screening exercises that periodically reminded us of our vulnerability to dismissal without notice. This man was perhaps a little older than the company average, quiet, composed, and serious. He radiated a selfless honesty that earned his classmates’ respect, and we could only speculate that his personality was just too reserved for the evaluation panel. When he left, I realized there was no one in the company with whom I would rather go into combat. I would find out later in Laos and Vietnam that, at least in this respect, my instinct had served me well and that chest-thumping on the parade ground does not guarantee good performance in combat.

I had begun to learn that judgments about people are a highly subjective matter, even when arrived at in a convocation of peers. In the case of OCS, I never discovered whether there existed a formal evaluation system or whether it was entirely a seat-of-the-pants exercise. Either way, I learned a valuable lesson about taking the measure of my fellow man, albeit one that took me a long time fully to absorb.

The main difference between basic training and OCS was one of expectations. At Ft. Knox, the purpose was to get you through. At Benning, the burden was on the officer candidate to prove why he should not be returned to the enlisted ranks; this was demonstrated by the fairly substantial number who didn’t finish. Otherwise, as best I recall, Benning was all mechanics: weapons, map reading, squad and platoon tactics, and the like. I recall no attention at all to leadership, to the relationship between officers and those they would lead.

I took no notice of it at the time. Only after a number of years at CIA did I realize that it was just the same there. Not until sometime in the late 1960s did CIA management, then led by Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) William Colby, even begin to express concern about leadership and leadership development as integral aspects of building and nurturing an organization. Until then, I did not question the tacit formula that treated leadership as simply an innate skill, something to be honed by experience but not taught. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that my experience with the Army way of doing things and the gradual recognition of its shortcomings

would, years later, make me a more productive participant in eventual changes in CIA's training philosophy and promotion criteria.

The JOTP requirement for military experience might reasonably have been regarded as being fulfilled by basic training and OCS, which was already more than required of graduates of the collegiate ROTC. Fortunately, however, the originators of the JOTP had provided for six months of troop duty after OCS, thus giving new 2nd lieutenants at least a brief opportunity to practice the leadership skills given such short shrift at Ft. Benning. My company commander, Captain Cole, had served in WW II and then, having been torn away from a civilian career—in what, I forget—to serve in the Korean War, decided just to stay in. He provided a welcome change of atmosphere from the anonymity of basic training and the unremitting pressure of OCS. Although he was aware from the start that there was something unusual about my status—he knew I'd be there only six months—he respected my inability to fill in the blanks. We even became friends; he had a girlfriend and a niece in neighboring Ayer. He introduced me to the latter, an attractive and amiable young lady, and the four of us would go on double dates.

Captain Cole had put me in charge of his 81mm mortar platoon. He made a point of telling me that this was something usually reserved for an experienced officer. OCS offered no training in the use of crew-served weapons, and I knew nothing of the 81mm mortars in the platoon I was to lead. It was his decision to make, however, and, in my ignorance, I had no qualms about taking on the job.

In any case, it was clearly not Cole's intention to leave me to fend for myself. I don't know if he made a conscious practice of coaching his new officers, but he and the company first sergeant, also a veteran of WW II and Korea, taught me invaluable lessons about how to deal with both subordinates and superiors. It's almost a cliché of military life: The grizzled, battle-scarred old sergeant and the company commander mentoring a green lieutenant with no combat experience. My experience suggests that it became a cliché because it's true, at least on occasion.

Sometimes it was little things. The first sergeant noticed that I made more visits to my platoon's barracks than he thought necessary, and he took me aside to suggest that I put a lid on that practice for the sake of rapport with my men. I was already being careful to holler "At ease!" as I opened the barracks door to avoid forcing anyone to stand, but I saw the wisdom in his advice.

One or two other things could have had more serious consequences. Officers from battalion or perhaps regimental headquarters visited one day for a demonstration of 81mm mortar fire. The first salvo landed respectably close to the target flags, but the second came near enough to the viewing stand to send our visitors fleeing for cover. The gun crews—with me standing by, of course—had failed to reset the

weapons after the first round, and they were, in effect, no longer delivering aimed fire. The gun crews were either ill-trained or very rusty, and Captain Cole may have had that in mind in his reaction to the embarrassment. It would have been easy for him to hang me out to dry—it was my platoon, after all—but he let me off the hook with not so much as a reprimand.

Recovering from a mistake is an important skill for anyone put in command of others, and I got a lesson in that on a day when I was preparing to march the company back to the barracks from a training exercise. Taking over from the first sergeant, I gave the command “Right face!” to get the troops into a column, and then “Forward, march!” Some moved, a few did not, or only hesitantly, and I heard some indecipherable complaining. The problem was that the sergeant had forgotten to bring the unit from parade rest to attention before turning it over to me, and I didn’t notice the omission until I tried to get it moving. A moment of panic, and then, a flash of inspiration: I would act as if the sergeant had actually given the prescribed order, and I shouted, “Since when does a company not fall in at attention?” The men were looking for a way out, not for a confrontation, and we got back underway. It wouldn’t have happened had I not been asleep at the switch, and the episode taught me something about the risks—in this case, fortunately, only of embarrassment—of violating one of the basic precepts in the Army, to put high value on attention to detail.

Not much about basic training or OCS had been truly enjoyable, so I was a little surprised to find how well troop duty suited me. Beyond a few beginner’s gaffes, my work had been well received—I began hearing, for example, that I was good at keeping the troops awake in the classroom—and my relationships with Captain Cole and the first sergeant were, I think, partly a cause and partly an effect of my ready adaptation to life as an infantry officer. When the time came, in the spring of 1956, to head for Washington, I felt real regret that this phase was over.

* * *

Chapter Two

Introduction to the Clandestine Service

I still remember the thrilling sense of being part of a crusade as I began the mundane task of typing my first dispatch to Tokyo. It was only something to do with the bureaucratic mechanics of managing an agent but enough to make me feel part of a grand enterprise.





Above: CIA Headquarters—from its creation in September 1947 until the opening of its northern Virginia headquarters in 1961—was situated in this complex of buildings at 2430 E Street, NW in Washington, DC.

Offices not to be associated with CIA were located in the warren of “temporary” office buildings built during the first and second world wars in West Potomac Park and the mall adjoining the Lincoln and Washington Monuments. They would serve for years after WWII ended. Their demolition began in the 1960s and was completed only in 1971. In 1954, Temporary Building I in which the office of personnel was located still proved hard to find for a cabby I’d asked to take me from the Willard Hotel to “Quarters Eye” in the complex bordering Ohio Drive—about a mile and a half as the crow flies—for my first interview on entering on duty.



The JOTP staff had told me, before sending me off to the Army, that my profile suggested intelligence analysis would be a better fit for my skill set than clandestine operations. Knowing nothing about either, especially the latter, I offered no objection, but my Army experience had had the effect of instilling in me a powerful desire for action-oriented work. Once back in Washington, I made this known to my JOTP adviser, who merely remarked that such transformations were not unusual. Having gotten a reevaluation of my aptitudes that found me also suitable for operations, he had me transferred to that side of the house.

The change raised the question: to what country or area would I like to be assigned after training? The program needed to know in order to decide on an “interim assignment” to a country desk that would precede the Operations Course at CIA’s Virginia training center. The question evoked memories from childhood, when Betty and I had devoured books on China, especially those of the then-popular Pearl Buck. I had not pursued this or any other geographical interest in school, and, of course, Americans were not at the time being posted to “Red China.” Asia still exerted a pull, however, and, after some discussion, my JOTP adviser arranged a place for me in Japan Branch in the Directorate of Plans (DDP), which managed operations and operational people abroad.

It was only then, two years into my CIA employment, that I really got to know some of the people who had been hired in my cohort. The majority came from Princeton and, as a group, now seem to me as having exemplified the level of quality that justified the Agency’s claim that it could have anyone it wanted. Their numbers reflected the staffing of OSS, which had drawn heavily on Ivy League universities for its rapid expansion after 1942. But in 1954, seven years after CIA had replaced OSS, that preponderance was declining but still substantial. At least three members of my JOTP cohort had received Ivy League (or “Little Ivy,” e.g., Williams College) schooling. I admired their style, but it was not evident to me that an Ivy League pedigree necessarily conferred superior knowledge.

As I look back on that period, I wonder why little displays of amateurism in CIA’s management style didn’t make me wonder if I’d picked the right employer. True, I had come to the outfit after 16 years of authority-ridden Catholic schooling and may thus have been more immature than most 22-year-olds. If I was not disposed to question authority, however, the same was true of my JOTP counterparts from the Ivy League and other secular schools. I found them enviably self-confident and socially

Chapter Two

sophisticated, but I don't recall their questioning authority any more than I did when reacting to our new employer.

At least in one respect, we were all remarkably naïve. In our first months on the job, we kept hearing about how quickly promotions came at CIA. We weren't seeing much direct evidence of that, but there were stories, with names attached, of managers who had reached GS-18 (SIS-4 in today's ranking system) in their early thirties. Something of that nature seems to have taken place in the expansion generated by the Korean War, but those days were gone, and promotions had actually slowed owing to the relatively young population of senior officers. It would not have taken much skill in mathematics to figure that out, but youthful enthusiasm drove out any interest we might have had in drawing the obvious conclusion.

None of us had been attracted by visions of sugar plums, however, and I believe that those who left after training did so after concluding that the intelligence trade was unlikely to be a good fit.

The four of us—me and the three above-mentioned Ivy Leaguers—rented rooms on Dupont Circle in downtown Washington before moving, with one or two more fellow JOTs, to a house at 3109 P Street in Georgetown. The place was fully furnished, down to its decorative ceramics and paintings. The two trusting ladies who owned it—they may have been sisters—were off on a sabbatical of some sort and had left without requiring a lease or any security deposit.

The deal almost came unglued when, a couple of days before we were to move in, one of us, Nick, discovered that he needed access to the house for some errand. When he got there, no one was home, so he tried the doors. Finding one open, he went inside just before the ladies returned. Nick had some difficulty reassuring them that we were actually the proper young gentlemen we professed to be and could be trusted to be responsible tenants.

Once we were installed at 3109 P Street, Nick became the entrepreneur of our social life. Parties became routine yet somehow managed not to inflict any significant damage to our landladies' property. On one occasion, Nick brought in two French girls—from just where I don't think I knew even then—and proceeded to display his nearly non-existent French. One of the girls was named Françoise, or so she said, and Nick managed to frustrate her with his steadfast refusal to pronounce the "s" in her name, thus converting it to the masculine form. None of the rest of us spoke French either, but we did manage to avoid that particular outrage.

In 1956, one such affair got a little tense when a British guest, a young lady, undertook to defend the British and Israeli effort to seize the Suez Canal. The

inhabitants of 3109 P St. were not Cold War ideologues, but we were all categorically opposed to that colonial venture. It took a little effort to keep things polite.

Only a few days after moving, we noticed a man not a lot older than ourselves lounging on the stairs to our basement entrance when we returned from work. Someone asked him what he was doing there and was told he was a member of the security detail protecting DCI Allen Dulles, who lived nearby. It turned out that Dulles too was renting, in his case a house that belonged to Livingston Merchant, then ambassador to Canada and subsequently under secretary of state.

It became clear a little later that protecting the DCI included checking up on his neighbors. Each of us got a call from one of the DCIs secretaries—this was probably in 1956—inviting us to visit him at his “E” Street office. We gathered there one morning in what resembled a classroom presided over by Mr. Chips—but with a bigger desk for the professor. Puffing on his pipe, Dulles gave us a little pep talk. I don’t recall that we got much by way of substance, and I would guess that he staged the event as much out of nostalgia for his years with young OSS operatives in Europe as for our instruction.

Introduction to DDP Culture

The collegial style of DDP management made it easy for a newcomer to feel at home in his new environment, and I had the sense that my housemates in Georgetown felt the same way. Not that everything was sweetness and light in every office. I remember a feud between one of my Japan Branch colleagues and an officer then in Tokyo that got so venomous the branch chief ordered the omission of signatures on dispatches to and from the field. He hoped that anonymous correspondence would keep the combatants uncertain about just who was at the other end of a given exchange.

I was surprised but not at all unhappy with the *laissez faire* tone of Japan Branch management. I was expected to ask for help when I encountered something that neither experience nor common sense would suffice to deal with, but otherwise I was left to communicate with the field largely as I saw fit. My supervisor would see my correspondence before it left, of course, so I was not entirely on my own, but the general atmosphere was one of expectation that I would be able to cope.

Service in the branch made me newly aware of aspects of the DDP culture, one of the most conspicuous being its indifference—hostility is hardly an exaggeration—to planning. The guiding principle—usually unstated but clear from the tone of deprecatory remarks about bureaucratic exercises such as the budget—was that operations worth supporting would be conceived and executed on the scene by experienced

field case officers who needed no advice from the home office. “Experienced” was a buzzword of the period that implicitly qualified an operations officer to make judgments about what needed to be done and how to do it. It seems to me now, remembering various senior colleagues of the period, that length of service, perhaps more than level of achievement, determined one’s eligibility for this elite status.

Be that as it may, the “experience” totem supported the enshrinement of spontaneity when initiating operational activity; less attention was paid to the analysis of objectives or the suitability of potential means. An expression of confidence that a proposed action would materially reduce communist influence in a target population or institution generally sufficed to get Headquarters approval.

This dynamic was doubtless part of the legacy of the OSS, which as a new organization had started with no relevant practical experience and very little knowledge of its new areas of operation. In CIA’s early years, few saw the need to try to fill these gaps. One result was the pro forma quality of such planning as was done. No bureaucracy could admit even to itself that it was flying by the seat of its pants, and, in any case, there was always the budget to be justified. So, we had an annual exercise to update the Related Mission Directive (RMD), the document that described the following year’s projects.

The RMD was never, so far as I knew, used as a guide to action, let alone an examination of operating assumptions; rather, it was only a response to purely bureaucratic requirements. Its objectives were outlined in general, aspirational language (for example, recruit Japanese intellectuals who can support our student union program or perhaps augment existing programs). The means would be specified mostly in terms of the project’s financial and material requirements; the rest was left to the field.

It was much later, after I had retired into my second career as an intelligence historian, that I discovered the basis for this casual approach to planning. The first CIA directors (and the leaders of its short-lived predecessor, the Central Intelligence Group) were military officers. Except for Walter “Beedle” Smith (1950–53), who had struggled to rationalize the new Agency’s structure, they were at least as much concerned with its bureaucratic status and functions in the US defense establishment as they were with honing its professional competence.

The result was that, when I joined CIA in 1954, Allen Dulles, OSS veteran and brother of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, was presiding over an organization that both retained the structural changes mandated by Smith yet was in thrall to a spirit that glorified every day as a new day and disdained the lessons of the past. One is reminded of Henry Ford and his comment that “history is bunk.” Accordingly, CIA saw its mission as finding and seizing opportunities to frustrate Soviet expansion.

In this “Just get on with it!” atmosphere, we ran operations with scant attention to tradecraft, i.e., protecting the security of covert operations, because we knew that compromise, at least in the noncommunist world, would probably have no grievous consequences for either our officers or their agents.

When I arrived at the Japan Desk in 1956, the Allied occupation of Japan had ended only four years earlier. Cold War tensions had already become the main preoccupation of Washington’s national security establishment, however, and CIA’s main task in Japan was to support the overall US effort to ensure that the now-sovereign government in Tokyo remained aligned with the anticommunist Free World.

Our efforts took the form of covert operations of the type that became public knowledge in the mid-1970s, when the Church and Pike Committees held their hearings. We wanted to build institutions like those that we saw as supporting representative government in the West: anti-communist student associations, labor unions, and veterans’ organizations—all of which were sanctioned by the Tokyo government. I still remember the thrilling sense of being part of a crusade as I began the mundane task of typing my first dispatch to Tokyo. It was only something to do with the bureaucratic mechanics of managing an agent but enough to make me feel part of a grand enterprise.

In 1956, the Directorate of Plans which had resulted from the merger in 1952 of the separate organizations that had managed covert action (Office of Policy Coordination) and intelligence collection (Office of Special Operations) was only four years old. It had been imposed on the previously autonomous elements by DCI Smith. Famous for his hardnosed leadership in World War II, Smith did as much, I think, as any man could have to integrate the two functions. He did succeed in ending the practice of allowing two autonomous components running covert operations overseas to conduct uncoordinated recruitment efforts in the same population of potential agent candidates. Both cultures put up strenuous resistance even to that commonsense reform, however, and, in the covert action-oriented Japan Branch (now also responsible for collection), I immediately encountered an almost sneering disdain for the practitioners of intelligence collection. Because I was looking for action, I was an easy recruit into branch orthodoxy, and, until it was time to enter the Operations Course in early 1957, I was happily and uncritically engaged in helping prevent Japan from being absorbed by Soviet communism.

Getting Around DC

In addition to acquiring some familiarity with CIA’s idiosyncrasies, I found time during my introductory stint at Headquarters to learn my way around the District of Columbia. This involved the waste of much time and gasoline—and a toll on my

Chapter Two

equanimity—as I was continually led astray by Pierre L’Enfant’s design of major thoroughfares radiating out from the city’s center. Because few of them met at 90-degree angles, getting onto the right street in the right direction long remained a trial-and-error exercise for me.

Fortunately, female company was easier to find than street addresses. Washington was still a quiet Southern city, nothing like today’s cosmopolitan center, but it attracted young women to its colleges and to low-level government jobs that even then were a mainstay of the local economy. A WWII relic in the form of a small officers’ club still stood on New Hampshire Avenue near Dupont Circle. A couple of housemates and I found a threesome of young ladies there one evening, and I played my “aw shucks” country boy act to perfection, winding up with the most personable and best-looking of the three—a Southern girl—and the promise of future dates.

All of this accorded with the conservative moral standards of the era. For something racier, there were the strip clubs that still enlivened parts of the city. These were a real treat, at least for me, as I had no prior experience in these matters. They were a rare treat, too, as I, like the rest of the P Street household, lived on a 2nd lieutenant’s pay, and such entertainment was expensive, even just to look at. The local women’s colleges, however, could hardly charge admission to visitors picking up their dates. I particularly remember Trinity College off Connecticut Avenue above Dupont Circle. A student who had tickets—I don’t remember how we had met—invited me to escort her to President Eisenhower’s second inaugural ball in 1957.

Entertainment locales, much fewer than now, were nevertheless near heaven for a culturally deprived small-town music buff, especially for one who favored classical music. My main resource (this is well before the Kennedy Center opened in 1971) was a serendipitous find that I made one Sunday afternoon leaving my first residence near Dupont Circle. I was hardly out of the door when I heard a piano being played at a beautifully professional level, and I followed the sound to its source at the Phillips Gallery down the street. Admission was free and the music wonderful; it became a regular item on my agenda. The only other such performance center I can remember was located at Constitution Hall, the headquarters of the Daughters of the American Revolution, on 17th Street. For me, its big difference from the Phillips Gallery was an admission fee.

Another feature of life in Washington was so integral that I can’t remember anyone even mentioning it at the time to either defend or condemn it. That was racial segregation. In the mid-1950s, Jim Crow was alive and well. Restaurant clients were white not only in the District but also in northern Virginia, across the Potomac River. After I returned from my first overseas tour (Japan) in 1959, I was startled to learn that black applicants were now eligible for work as bus drivers in the DC

transportation system. It seemed as if I was as accustomed to segregation as nearly all my fellow White Americans.

This passivity dissolved when I met the son of a cousin—she was at least 15 years older than I—who had married a black lawyer from Chicago after WW II. Their children, all of whom distinguished themselves (one became a Broadway actor), included a son who eventually became a university professor of mathematics and who I remember intimidating me with his formidable intellect when we first met in the 1960s.

Our ensuing friendship dispelled any indifference on my part to the issue of racial justice, but it was not until the 1980s, while in charge of hiring people for the same program that had hired me, that I had the opportunity to help deal with the issue. At that time, I tried to persuade CIA personnel management to encourage more black applicants and to open the door to gays, pointing out that, in the latter case, even incremental progress toward parity was dissolving CIA's contention that a homosexual relationship constituted a vulnerability to blackmail and therefore a security risk. I didn't expect these urgings to be met with, "Gee, why didn't we think of that?" and they weren't. Nevertheless, I like to think they helped stimulate the gradual transformation of the Agency's approach to race and gender questions.

The Operations Course, 1956

In the summer of 1956, after almost a year on the Japan Desk, my number came up for the Operations Course. There had been only two previous sessions, before which, it seems (no one on the staff ever mentioned it), DDP area divisions ran their own training on an ad hoc basis. The training staff consisted almost entirely of OSS veterans. As I recall, some were weapons specialists, and others had skills such as surveillance and operational reporting.

I doubt the present generation, so much less deferential to authority than mine, would have tolerated the obsolete curriculum that we encountered in the training. True, CIA was only ten years old at that point and could have been expected to bear some traces of its OSS origins, but it was obvious even to us innocents that we were being prepared to re-fight WW II rather than to prevail in the Cold War.

One exercise involved trying to infiltrate a simulated enemy prison camp to rescue Allied prisoners. The staff let us discover that a culvert, a couple of feet in diameter, ran underneath the fence into the "camp," but, on the prescribed night, we all let caution overcome any macho pretensions and looked for a less claustrophobic approach to the target. As I recall, successful entry was our sole objective. I don't remember anything at all about disabling a guard, for example, or helping the notional prisoners escape. In other words, there was a distinctly pro forma air to the whole proceeding.

Chapter Two

An exercise in the interrogation of a cooperative subject was more congenial to me and seemed far more likely to be relevant to my real-world deployment. It was designed to stimulate the student's capacity to generate relevant questions for a willing but passive subject. It was almost as if it had been designed to play to my strengths. As the interview proceeded, the instructor/subject began shaking his head to signal that I had exhausted his list of questions on the point at issue.

As for the recruitment and handling of agents—the sort of thing we trainees could expect to be doing once in the field—there was relatively little. There must have been more on the subject—it's just too important a discipline to be treated casually—but it's one that would have captured my full attention had it been as intensively treated as it deserved. I remember just one imperative about agent recruitment: Rapport! Rapport with agents! Rapport with prospective agents! Rapport with contacts in the intelligence services of allies! It almost seemed as if someone had had such a bad experience trying to compel the cooperation of potential sources that the trauma had to be exorcised in succeeding generations of case officers. Overall, the program failed to meet any reasonable expectation of the challenges we would meet in the world of the Cold War.

There were, to be sure, indispensable skills with which we got some familiarization, especially operational and intelligence reporting. Our impatience with the mechanical presentation of much of the material was tempered to some extent by the goodwill of instructors, many of whom displayed an admirable personal commitment to CIA and its mission. A little of the training was actually fun, in addition to being entirely relevant. The course put considerable emphasis on street surveillance, with exercises conducted primarily in nearby cities. One of these was in Richmond, which I admit I remember mainly for an encounter while entering a department store. Coming out was a young woman with the most brilliant blue eyes I'd ever seen; she fixed these on me until we passed each other.

I know that the very mention of such trivia at the expense of more detailed coverage of substance reveals what must have been an almost frivolous attitude toward the tradecraft curriculum. I remember being told by a training officer that I was doing very well at things I liked and not so well at things I didn't.

I was not, however, the only disaffected trainee. As the course progressed, general unhappiness with the regime continued to grow. On graduation night, the fifty or so students—most of us, anyway—drank enough to shed our inhibitions and began looking to create a little mischief. A few of us took notice of some WW II light trucks parked at the edge of a tract of land on which new dormitories were about to be built. A check of their dashboards revealed that no ignition key was required. A push of a button would start one, and we exploited this with some unauthorized joyriding around the campus. We flattened all of the surveyors' stakes on the site of

the new buildings and played some chicken as drivers challenged each other to be the first to swerve to avoid head-on collision. This caper was the main count against us when, on our return to Washington, the then chief of training, a onetime OSS colonel named Matthew Baird, called us into his office and ordered us to explain ourselves.

I was surprised, even disappointed, to find my Ivy League colleagues—usually so assertive—joining me in abashed silence as Baird waited for an answer. It seemed to me that our behavior had a reason, although certainly not an excuse, and, when the silence got too embarrassing, I ventured to summarize my reaction to the irrelevant, outdated subject matter that insisted on preparing us to fight the last war. That opened the floodgates, and it was Baird's turn to sit in abashed silence as the complaints poured out. It seems that he felt some sympathy for our case, as we were spared disciplinary action. Whether the incident resulted in any refinements to the course and its presentation is another matter. I do know that the quality of training for the directorate remained a contentious issue for a good many years, but I am not well-versed in the current state of play.



Chapter Three

Apprenticeship in Post-Occupation Japan, 1957–59

The station's covert programs were all “hearts and minds,” with no dirty tricks, even against the Japan Communist Party. Japan was now a firm ally against the communist monolith, and our mission was to help keep it that way.





Old Town Tokyo in the 1950s. Photo: © Allan Cash Picture Library / Alamy Stock Photo

More than a decade after the end of the WWII and five years after US occupation, I arrived in Japan and found a city of limitless crowds of silent people. Still only 25-years old, I would learn the language from greatly hospitable people, including a hotel bartender and my cook and housekeeper, Obasan (“honorable auntie”, below).



Photo: Thomas Ahern Family Albums

In 1957, Pan American Airways provided air travel from San Francisco to Tokyo. PanAm was then the premier US international airline. Jet aircraft were not yet in commercial service, so I flew in a Boeing Stratocruiser, driven by four reciprocating engines. By today's standards, its range and speed were limited, and the aircraft required refueling stops at Honolulu and Midway Island before landing at Tokyo's Haneda Airport. Nevertheless, the accommodations were far more civilized than they are in this current era of deregulation and the resulting imperative to cut costs. Luxuries included the bunk bed supplied to each passenger and the full meals prepared on board.

My first impression of Tokyo was of limitless crowds of silent people, an impression reinforced by my introduction to a subway in which every train was standing room only. People did not get in line to board; rather, a shapeless mass shuffled—the only sound—each right on the heels of the next in a tactic dictated by the need to keep competing commuters from preempting any unoccupied space. I developed a theory, which I never tested, that, if you consistently left any open space between you and the person in front of you, you would wind up going backward.

The Dai Ichi (Number One) Hotel, in the center of Tokyo, was not as crowded as the subway, but it was not exactly spacious, either. The subway, above ground at that point, ran along the side of the building where my tiny room was located. The almost constant roar of arriving and departing trains made a stark contrast with the strangely silent crowds I encountered when riding those trains myself.

When I finally got checked in, I was ready for a drink and went downstairs to the bar. There I met Hiroshi, the very engaging young bartender. I stayed at the Dai Ichi for some time, for, despite the ubiquity of American installations in Japan, the CIA station in Tokyo had no temporary quarters for visitors or new arrivals. That circumstance encouraged my regular visits to the Dai Ichi's bar, where Hiroshi clearly welcomed the opportunity to practice his English. My Japanese needed a lot more work than his English, but for the time being I was content to get a guided tour of things Japanese in my own language. The age difference was minor—I was still only 25—and we became friends. When he married, a year or so later, he invited me to serve as the wedding photographer.

By then, I had moved to a modest, characterless, Western-style house in the Akasaka district, but I soon jumped at a chance to take over a house being vacated

by another station officer. Little, if any, larger, it had all the charm that the first one lacked. The first floor was done in Japanese style, with shoji (rice paper) windows and tatami (rice straw and rush grass) floors. The upstairs contained only my bedroom and a Western-style bathroom. The widowed cook/housekeeper, whom I always addressed by the conventional honorific, Obasan (“honorable auntie”) and her lovely, somewhat handicapped daughter, Eiko-san, lived downstairs. There was not a lot of room for three people, but I found space for a small upright piano I had bought from a departing colleague. Gas heaters kept the place warm during the day, but their use at night posed the risk of lowering gas pressure across Tokyo to a level that might extinguish pilots. I therefore had to turn the heater off at bedtime to prevent a potentially lethal accumulation of gas should it have resumed while we slept.

The previous tenant had informed me that Obasan, who had worked for Americans for several years, spoke passable English, but, when he introduced me to her, he did so in Japanese (he was himself a Nisei, a second-generation Japanese-American), and she responded in kind. From that time until I left, almost two years later, not two words of English passed between us. She was the greatest help I had in learning Japanese, and she seemed to enjoy the role. Part-time study at the famous Japanese-language school, Naganuma, helped too, but not as much as Obasan did. She was the widow of an official with the Manchurian Railway Company, the instrument of Japanese control in Manchuria, and her anecdotes about life there provided food for conversation. Just one thing was never mentioned—I thought it politic to follow her lead in this—namely, the war.

Obasan was well-known to my new colleagues, who had been my predecessor’s frequent guests. I carried on the tradition of Sino-Japanese dinners for them. By popular demand, these always featured gyoza—“potstickers”—the pork dumplings she had perfected during her years in Manchuria.

When I arrived in Japan, the occupation had been over for five years. Not everyone knew this. One morning at the Dai Ichi Hotel I heard an American tourist ask his wife if Japan was still occupied. English was already well established as a second language, and, although I continued parttime Japanese language lessons at Naganuma, I didn’t need it with my professional contacts. All of them, including, rather surprisingly, an elderly retired admiral, spoke at least serviceable English—his was quite good—and my Japanese served me mainly for travel and to make acquaintances and explore the nightspots of the Ginza and Shinjuku.

Winning Hearts and Minds

The station’s covert programs were all “hearts and minds,” with no dirty tricks, even against the Japan Communist Party. Japan was now a firm ally against the

communist monolith, and our mission was to help keep it that way. In the late 1950s, world communism still looked like a potentially overwhelming ideological force, and the goal in Japan was to preserve and strengthen the non-communist—preferably anti-communist—orientation of politically sensitive groups such as students, organized labor, and the press. The strategy was the same as that employed in Western Europe: to combat communist front organizations by creating and supporting anti-communist equivalents. Although we operated on a smaller scale than our European counterparts, we wanted to build Japanese versions of entities like the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and the National Students Association (NSA) in the United States.

Our partners in this enterprise were a small group of actively anti-communist Japanese businessmen. My role was to try to create anti-communist student organizations, modeled on our NSA. My Japanese counterparts had already graduated from university, but they still had connections they used to find potential leaders in Tokyo's universities. The case officer handling the project had already left Tokyo when I arrived; it seemed that he had not been deeply engaged with it, and it had not prospered. There was some talk about terminating the effort, but my branch chief decided to give it one more shot. Considering its problems, he might more reasonably have assigned it to an officer with relevant experience, but instead he made it the main item on my agenda.

My Japanese counterparts in the project were two young businessmen chosen to work with the station by the business leaders who formed the core of the station's stable of contacts. I remember a faint unease with this arrangement; there was something counterintuitive about businessmen building student unions and—especially—trade unions. Their anti-communism served to establish their acceptability, however, and I soon lost any inhibitions about our partners.

There were a couple of other things on my plate. One of them was handling a retired admiral who had been recruited for his contacts in the military and political establishments. He might once have been a valuable source, but, if so, his productivity, like that of the student project, had diminished to the point that turning him over to a novice case officer who looked even younger than his 25 years in age-conscious Japan did not seem to put at risk a particularly valuable asset. I can remember only one of his reports being distributed to consumers, something general about Japan's relationship with China, and it was not long before I got instructions to terminate the relationship.

I realized later that I had been given the case precisely because of the prospect of its termination. In the late 1950s and well into the 1960s, the DDP—its Far East Division, at least—nursed an almost crippling phobia when it came to parting ways with unproductive agents. In this case, the station finessed the issue by assigning

the newbie, me, to serve as the bearer of the bad news. Although I hadn't absorbed the general aversion to liquidating empty activity, the atmosphere in the station that surrounded the exercise was nevertheless daunting, and I felt the need to rehearse my announcement until it was automatic. The admiral, a soft-spoken gentleman, absorbed the news with complete composure, and I have since wondered if perhaps he had expected it as he was surely aware of the thin content he had been giving us.

The total lack of drama enhanced the utility of the exercise in that it taught me something about the need to avoid being bound by the constraints of our own tribal values. I would later learn that some of those values exercise particular power over members of an organization that sees itself as elite. Just how they acquired that influence, however, could be rather mysterious. The required display of activism and self-confidence could easily be traced to the exploits of the OSS in World War II, but I have no idea how the aversion to terminating worn-out agents became part of this mental world.

My willingness to defy a tribal taboo by terminating the admiral's services did not mean that my own professional practice was immune to the casual tradecraft practices that characterized the DDP of the era. When I took over the case, the station had been meeting the admiral for years in the coffee shop of Frank Lloyd Wright's famous Imperial Hotel, and I continued the practice. Whether Japanese counterintelligence didn't know about our connection, didn't care about it, or was perhaps even controlling it, it went undisturbed until the end. We would doubtless have been more circumspect had the Japanese not failed in their postwar legal system to prohibit the conduct of espionage on their territory. As it was, we remained free to practice in this nonchalant style.

My boss in Tokyo was Gordon Jorgensen, who had been a Marine intelligence officer in the Pacific Theater during WW II. I grew to respect him as a person as much as anyone I've ever known. Like many people who joined CIA after serving in one or another of the military intelligence services during the war, "Jorgy" was not particularly well versed in the agent management aspects of clandestine operations and was therefore not ideally equipped to mentor a beginner in that aspect of the trade. His honesty and selflessness shone through, however, and, in any case, I was not much engaged with the subject either.

Nevertheless, I learned a lot, mostly about how to induce people of a different culture to accept American ways of building organizations even as I adapted to the highly personal Japanese style of the work of winning friends and influencing people. By the end of my tour, I had refined the student program and quadrupled its budget and, in general, found Japan a fascinating country and my work deeply satisfying. As the end of my tour of duty approached in mid-1959, Headquarters offered me a course of fulltime language study, to be followed by a commitment to long-term service in Japan.

At the same time, Jorgy learned that he had been appointed the next chief of station (COS) in Vientiane, Laos. He was aware of the plan for my future and did not invite me to follow him, but he did mention the tenuous political situation in Laos, whose neighbors included China and North Vietnam. He thought it likely that the United States would sooner or later feel obliged to undertake a major covert program to protect both Vientiane and its noncommunist neighbors, Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. The combination of my personal regard for him and the lure of action on one of the Cold War's front lines was irresistible, and, not having committed myself to the Japan proposal, I asked him to let me follow him to Vientiane.

Jorgy said he'd be glad to have me if Headquarters approved, and the deal was soon done. There were still a few months left in my Japan tour, which I remember mainly for the fixation of Jorgy's replacement on the recruitment of Japanese journalists to plant anticommunist material in the press. We were to start making blind approaches to reporters with the desired access; "take a reporter to lunch" became the watchword for the proposed campaign.

The Japanese government was far more overtly committed to the Tokyo-Washington alliance than was the Tokyo press. The latter might share our fear of world communism and a perceived need for the alliance, but it did not necessarily accept that every US policy and program was in fact prudent and designed to serve Japanese as well as US interests. Accordingly, it was not hard to imagine one or more of our lunch guests taking issue with this US effort to exert the same influence on the press that it was assumed to have on the government. The effort would certainly become food for gossip in Tokyo's newsrooms.

We at the working level finally persuaded our new branch chief that this was a dangerous as well as almost certainly unproductive tactic, and he grudgingly allowed us to return to the standard practice of identifying and approaching individual prospects using existing contacts or other leads. This may or may not have reduced the number of new recruitments, but it probably did save us a lot of embarrassment. In any case, it was not as if we entirely lacked assets in the press.

Later, in Laos and Vietnam in the 1960s, I found a similar indifference to cover and operational security. Officers engaged in covert rural projects had nothing but the most nominal cover and made no serious effort to conceal their affiliation. This was harmless enough in a war zone in which most of our activity was essentially overt, but the casual attitude they brought to the matter nevertheless served to reinforce the dubious lessons I had learned in Tokyo. Fortunately, I retained sufficient common-sense regard for operational security that, when I later found myself in places with governments more concerned with protecting their secrets, I could still adapt my practice to fit the circumstances.



